

## Minnesota Takes the Fast Break to Learning

Minnesota-known for it's pristine environment, cold climate, land of 10,000 lakes, and home of our nation's most talked about Governor, Jesse Ventura. Last November when Jesse Ventura won the Gubernatorial election he declared that "Minnesota had shocked the world"

Last January when Governor Ventura unveiled his first state budget Child Nutrition advocates were surprised to learn that this former professional wrestler and radio personality committed \$6million to "Fast Break To Learning. A universal style school breakfast program aimed at feeding all elementary children school breakfast at little or no charge in an educational environment that fully integrates nutrition into the school day.

So, how is it that this Reform Party 'fiscal conservative' and advocate of 'personal responsibility' would embrace a policy that is often times associated with the decline of parental responsibility and the erosion of family values?

Simply put, the Governor believes in investing in educational initiatives that work.

We would all like to think that public policy and legislation is based on well thought-out ideas, well planned strategies and founded 'in scientific research.

But in reality is public policy based on philosophy or favors? Research or rhetoric?

Science or spin? I would like to propose that it is a little bit of ALL of the above.

Our quest to convince the 'Man on the Street' in Minnesota that school breakfast is good education policy began 10 years ago.

In 1989, the hunger advocacy community in Minnesota convinced the Minnesota Legislature to pass a school breakfast mandate. This dramatically increased the number of sites that offered school breakfast.

It was good in that it increased availability of school breakfast, but didn't really convince local decision-makers of the educational value of the School Breakfast Program. We also learned that unfunded mandates do not harness local support from school boards, superintendents and school business officials. But we discovered that school breakfast resonated well with State Legislators. We built on that strength and after several small state funding increases, convinced the Legislature to fund four Universal School Breakfast pilot sites. The Legislature also provided funding for a study to demonstrate the effect of School Breakfast on test scores, attendance, behavior and any other measure of achievement.

Public education is one of the largest portions of our state budget, approximately \$2 billion per year for K-12 education alone. Think of the many education theories that have come and gone. With a price tag of \$20 million per year for elementary schools alone, we knew we would have to present proven results that Universal School Breakfast is a good investment.

Other studies dealt primarily with low-income children. Our study focused on average kids, in average communities 'in America's heartland. The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota was chosen as the contractor to perform the research. The study lasted for three years.

The results of the study showed significant improvement in behavior, decreased visits to the Nurses Office, improved test scores and dramatic increases in participation. The state average participation rate for School Breakfast is 13% while our pilots sustained participation rates between 75% and 93% for three years. After each year of the study, the University published a thorough report of the results. What we attempted to do in the public policy arena was to use this report to convince decision-makers. We found that too often the distinguished members of academe, the health care community and health educators end-up producing wonderful work that is used to 'preach to the choir. It was difficult to get policy makers and local decision-makers to pay attention to a scientific report. They simply don't have time.

So we decided to take science and put a little spin on it. Here is our Executive Summary of the research entitled *Energizing the Classroom*. This is an easy to read, colorful, upbeat report that gets the message out quickly in an attractive format to our 'Person of the Street.' To date we have distributed over 180,000 copies of this report, worldwide. We've attracted the attention of parents, school administrators, state legislators, members of congress and even members of the President's Cabinet.

The challenge that Child Nutrition Programs face is that they are top-down federal programs that operate in a bottom-up world. K-12 education in this country is a local issue first and then a state issue. If we want school nutrition programs to be recognized at education programs and not welfare programs, then they have to have that grassroots local support. In Minnesota, we are starting to recognize nutrition programs as part of education.

We currently have 41 elementary schools that offer a universal school breakfast program. The federal reimbursement and a state Targeted Breakfast Grant that requires a local match of one dollar for every three dollars in state aid provides the funding. This program represents a true collaboration of local, state and federal governments.

If our Governor's proposal named the Fast Break to Learning Program is passed by the legislature, we will have enough funding to provide a universal style breakfast program in 38% of our elementary schools statewide. We have a tri-partisan government with a Republican controlled House, a Democratic Senate and a Reform Party Governor. Our Republican controlled House has passed Fast Break to Learning and our Senate is debating the omnibus education bill now. The talk in the corridors at the Capitol is that they may put more than the \$6 million requested by the Governor in their bill.

So with a good philosophy and few favors along the way, sound research with some political rhetoric and science with a little bit of spin, Minnesota is about to take a *Fast Break to Learning*.